

THE FATAL RUBY

—BY—
CHARLES GARVICE

Author of "Just a Girl," "Diana and Destiny,"
"In Wolf's Clothing," etc.

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(Continued.)

"Not a bit, sir; you see, I was a street acrobat for a short spell. I hope you're the same, sir?"

"I'm all right," said Ronald, still rather embarrassed by a gratitude which, like most men, he could not express. "Here, light up."

Smithers took the cigar and smoked with obvious enjoyment as the cab made its way westward. Ronald's face grew graver as they approached Chelsea, and his manner so preoccupied that Smithers' sharp eyes could not fail to notice that something was wrong. He had, naturally enough, wondered why a gentleman should be travelling at night in the van of a goods train. The imagination of a Cockney is both quick and fertile; and Smithers asked himself, as he glanced from the corners of his bright, alert eyes at his companion's moody countenance, whether this open-hearted gentleman had been "up to something." Smithers considered that the conjecture was not an improbable one; for his varied knowledge of the world helped him to surmise that his benefactor was one of those "swells" who are apt to get into scrapes; therefore, though he could not ask any questions, he kept a sharp look-out, alternately watching the street and Ronald's face.

As the cab turned the corner of Copley Place, in which was Ronald's flat, Smithers caught sight of a man strolling along the pavement.

"There's a 'tec," he remarked casually.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Escape.

"A what?" asked Ronald, rousing himself.

"A detective, sir," explained Smithers. "I know him. Oh, not on my own business; it was a pal of mine who got into trouble. He's on the look-out for somebody or something."

"He's looking out for me," said Ronald quietly.

Smithers instantly thrust up the trap-door in the roof of the cab and told the cabman to turn around. When the cab had gone some little distance, Smithers looked hard but respectfully at Ronald.

"Just in time, sir," he said. "I'm glad I caught sight of him, as the mouse said when it saw the cat watching for it on the other side of the cheese. Nothing serious, I hope, sir?"

Ronald hesitated for a moment; but there was something so honest, so trustworthy, in the blue eyes turned to him, that he hesitated for a moment only.

"I don't think so," he said, with a laugh. "Fact is, Smithers, I've got into a row, a bit of a scrape; and I fancy this man, this detective wants me."

"Ah, well, he ain't the only man as wants what he won't get, and won't get what he wants," said Smithers, with quiet confidence. "I don't hanker to go poking my nose into what don't concern me; I've suffered for it too often, as the dog said when at last he got his out of the beehive; but if you want to give that chap the slip just say so, sir, and let me help you. Seems to me I can come in 'anywhere' for it stands to reason that you're a stranger at this business."

"Yes, I'm afraid I shan't be able to go back to my flat," said Ronald. "I can't explain without telling you the whole story—"

"No need for that, sir," said Smithers quickly. "I ain't curious." He considered for a moment or two; then he said: "Would you mind telling me your name, sir?"

"Desborough—Ronald Desborough," said Ronald, a trifle reluctantly. "My flat is No. 16, first floor."

But Smithers caught his tone, and nodding quickly, said:

"All right, sir; don't you be afraid; I shall forget it in 'alf an hour. I'm a shockin' bad 'and at rememberin' names. Look 'ere, sir, you just step into that public-house we're comin' to, and 'ave a glass o' somethin'. I'll be back in 'alf an hour, or less. If I don't turn up—well, 'ere's 'Good-bye!' and thank you for all your kindness, sir."

Before Ronald could accept or refuse the proposal, or, indeed, prevent the man, Smithers had stopped the cab, leapt lightly out, and was walking in a business-like way back towards Copley Street. Ronald dismissed the cab, and went into the public-house. It was a quiet little place, the compartment he entered was empty; he ordered a whisky-and-soda, and sat down to wait—and to think.

The fact that the detective had been set to watch for him made it evident that Lydstone bore malice and meant to gratify it by dragging Ronald into a police-court. The time passed slowly, the half-hour dragged by; but just as Ronald, full of remorse for having allowed Smithers to run the risk of getting into trouble, was going to take his departure in search of him, the swing door opened and Smithers entered.

He took no notice of Ronald, but ordered half a point of ale, and entered into conversation with the bar-

maid.

"Well, Em'ly," he said, with the warm manner of an old and affectionate friend, "how is the world treatin' of you?"

"My name don't 'appen to be Em'ly," she retorted, with a toss of the head and a comprehensive wipe of the pewter counter.

"No," exclaimed Smithers in accents of well-simulated astonishment. "Surely I ain't makin' no mistake! Ain't you the lady as took the beauty prize at Barnett Fair last year?"

The barmaid's face relaxed with a reluctant smile, and she made a playful dab at him with her damp cloth, a dab which Smithers fielded cleverly.

"Go along with you!" she said, putting up her hand to thrust a hairpin in its place, and displaying a costly brass ring set with coloured glass.

"Well, you'd have took it if you'd been there," said Smithers with emphatic conviction. "The one who did 'ave been your twin sister—by another mother."

"You're full of your chaff," she retorted, but with a still wider smile.

"That's what the donkey said to the easy chair," remarked Smithers, a little absently, for he saw that Ronald was growing impatient. "Well, I must be on the move—get back to my job."

"And what may that be?" she asked, with a yawn which only partially hid her curiosity.

"I'm engaged at present in keepin' a gent awake—he's a clerk in a Gov't office. Well, so long! Meet you at the same place and time next Sunday evenin'! My love to muvver and brother Teddy."

Dodging a slap with the cloth, he went out. Ronald, impatient, but half-laughing, followed him. Smithers was elaborately unconscious of his pursuer until he had reached a cross street, up which Smithers turned, and, pausing presently, waited for Ronald to join him.

"It's all right, sir," he said. "I've clean put him off the scent."

"How on earth did you manage it?" asked Ronald laughingly.

"Oh, it wasn't difficult, sir," said Smithers, with a little air of self-satisfaction which was quite excusable. "I walked straight upstairs to the flat and knocked at the door, and presently up comes my gentleman."

"Hullo," says he, 'what do you want, my man?' I don't know what it has to do with you, says I, 'eyn' 'im up and down, but I've come to call on a gentleman by the name of Desbro', Ronald Desbro'." "Oh," he says, 'what do you want with 'im?' I looked 'im up and down again. 'You've got a bad attack of curiosity, I says; 'It's down to yer 'ead, I says. 'If I was you, I should see a doctor, a good one; but, if it will do you any good an' relieve your pain, I don't mind tellin' yer that the gentleman, Mr. Desbro', employed my valuable assistance to get 'is luggage aboard a ship at the Victoria Docks this mornin', and 'e, bein' in a hurry, give me a sixpence, thinkin' it was a 'alf a sov. He didn't find out 'is mistake till he was on board, then he calls out to me to come to these rooms of 'is and ask 'is man to make it up to me."

Smithers paused here, and eyed the pavement with dissatisfaction.

"It was a precious thin kind of story, sir; but it was the best I could make up in the time; and in an ordinary way the 'tec would have been on me like a terrier on a rat; but he was caught by the words 'Victoria Docks'; an' though he thought I was a plant, he was too keen on gettin' a clue to you to drop on an insignificant cove like me; so he says, says he, quite indifferent like—'Oh, so Mr. Desbro's gone abroad? Do you 'appen to remember the name of the ship?' 'Why, of course,' I says; 'it was the Hairy Sonny.'"

"The what?" asked the puzzled Ronald. "Ah, yes; the Arizona."

"That's what I said, sir," observed Smithers, continuing. "Oh, it was wot?" says he, 'I was wantin' to see Mr. Desbro'; but there ain't any one 'ere. His man's gone—got a 'oliday, I suppose; so both of us is done, my man.' He winks at me, as if he knew I was tryin' on a swindle, but that it weren't worth 'is while to trouble about a sprat like me. I grumble and grumbles a bit all the way down the stairs; an', knowin' that he was watchin' me, I set off up the street, instead o' down, an' makes my way by a kind o' a round to the public-house. And now, what is to be done, sir?"

"I don't quite know," said Ronald. "But the first thing I have to do is to thank you, Smithers, for the clever way in which you've come to my assistance. You're the sharpest fellow I've ever met; and a plucky one, too. You might have got into trouble with that detective. Look here, you must take this, or I shall be cut up."

He tried to press a five-pound note into Smithers' hand; but Smithers respectfully pushed the hand away.

"Not me, sir," he said firmly, pleadingly. "As I said afore, I don't want to take any money from you. If I've done anything to help you

through your trouble, why, I'm more than satisfied." He hesitated a moment, then, with his head averted, said falteringly, "I don't want any money; but, if you think of doin' me a favour by way of payin' me back, I'd ask you, sir—"

"Go on," said Ronald. "What is it?"

"Of course, I shall be glad to do it, if I can."

"Do yer mean it, sir?" said Smithers, an eager light in his blue eyes, his flexible lips quivering slightly. "Then take me into yer service, sir!"

"But, my good fellow!" said Ronald, laughing, but with some regret. "How can I? I'm going to make a bolt of it—going abroad: I must."

"That's what I guessed, sir," said Smithers eagerly. "Take me with you, sir; I'm a useful kind of animal, and I'll serve you faithfully. Don't hesitate, sir! Just say the word! I can be of use to you; and I'll stand by you through thick and thin. I'm only a common sort of cove; but I'm fair took by you; it's yer way of treatin' speakin', it's yer way of treatin' a man as if he was a fellow 'uman bein' and a brother. Take me with you, sir!"

Ronald looked down at the earnest face, the pleading eyes. It was always hard for him to refuse any one anything; it was simply impossible for him to refuse this man, who was actually quivering with imploration. His hesitation lasted for scarcely more than a moment; then, with his careless, reckless laugh—it shook a little—he said:

"Come on, then! But where you are to come I really don't know, seeing that I don't know myself!"

"Lor' bless you, sir, there's nothin' in that!" cried Smithers joyously. "All the world's before us, and the gentleman said when he fell out of the balloon. We shall manage all right! And there ain't no call to go to furrin parts, unless you've set your mind on it. There's plenty o' places to hide in good old England. But wherever you go, even if it's to a suffragette meetin', I'm with you, sir."

Ronald laughed as he asked: "Did you ever hear of Mark Tapscott, Smithers?"

"Can't say I have, sir. Was he in the public-house line? Name seems to smell o' beer."

"He was a character in a book, a fellow who was always cheerful under all circumstances."

"Was he really, sir? Ah, then, most like he'd got a deaf mute for a mother-in-law."

"Well, anyway, you put me in mind of him," said Ronald.

"Glad to hear it, sir; perhaps he was a relation o' mine. Any way, I'm of his way of thinkin'. Nothin's so bad as that it can't be worst, as the man said when he told 'im that 'is wife 'ad got twins. 'What's the use o' complainin'?' if it's wet to-day, it'll be fine to-morrow—unless it snows. Why, bless you, sir, the sight o' your face an' the sound o' your voice would make a oyster want to get up an' dance! How would it be, sir, if we was to take a stroll in the park while you was a-thinkin' things out a bit?"

"As well there as anywhere else," said Ronald; "but I imagine you will have to do the thinking, Smithers, for I haven't an idea what to do or where to go."

CHAPTER IX.

Cara to the Rescue.

When Dexter Reece went down to the breakfast-room of Thorden Hall next morning, he found Evelyn standing by the window; and, as she turned and gave him her hand with a smile, he saw that she was pale, and he guessed that she had spent a sleepless night. He himself had slept but little, for his mind had been excited by the story of the giant ruby and the scene he had witnessed in the wood between Miss Desborough and her reckless brother.

"You are early," she said. "I am glad; it will give us more time. My father always breakfasts in his own room so you will please excuse him; and Mr. Lexham is always late. We will begin at once."

As a rule, Dexter Reece preferred to listen rather than talk; but this morning he exerted himself and proved a very agreeable companion; and, after a time, the harassed look disappeared from Evelyn's face, and he won a laugh or two from her. Just as they were finishing, Mr. Lexham entered, with profuse apologies for his belated appearance.

"But you must really lay the blame on your wonderful air, Miss Evelyn," he said. "It is so strong that it always acts with me as a narcotic. Now you must really let me look after myself," he added, as he went to the sideboard and critically and approvingly inspected the various dishes displayed there. "You two young people are going for a drive, I hear? How I wish I could join you—I haven't been invited, by the way—but I have a hard morning's work in the library. Some day, say in forty years' time, I shall refuse to work any more, and retire on my ill-gotten gains; then I shall ask you to drive me about—or walk beside my bath-chair."

"I too shall want one by that time," retorted Evelyn, with a laugh. "I ordered the carriage to come round directly after breakfast; so that I had better get my things on. By the way, Mr. Reece, you may want an overcoat, if we drive over the moor; it is always cold there," she added, as she left the room.

Mr. Lexham opened the Western Morning News, stuck it up against the coffee-pot, and prepared to enjoy his breakfast in the satisfactory and old-fashioned way dear to the heart of men of his age and habits. The

younger man went to the window and looked out, his eyes resting thoughtfully on the belt of trees through which Miss Desborough had disappeared the preceding night. Suddenly an exclamation from Mr. Lexham roused Reece from his reverie.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mr. Lexham. "What's this?" He read from the paper before him: "Lord Lydstone is lying dangerously ill at his residence in Eaton Square. The cause of his illness is attributed to an accident he met with on Wednesday night; though no details are forthcoming, it is rumored that his Lordship was injured in a fracas which took place at a card-party at which he was present; indeed, the name of his assailant is freely mentioned in the circle to which Lord Lydstone belongs. His Lordship is the second baron of that name, has considerable estates in Wenshire, and is a prominent member of the fashionable world."

Mr. Lexham shook his head gravely. "Fashionable world" means the Smart Set, I suppose. I'm not surprised at anything happening to a person belonging to that crew: I knew this Lydstone's father very well—in fact, I acted for him once or twice; but this young man gave me the go-by. I suppose I wasn't up-to-date enough for him; and I can't say that I'm sorry, for I don't like doing business with men of this kind. Judging by what this paragraph says, I imagine he got into some sort of row or other and got the worst of it. Yes! I am glad I am not his solicitor."

"You are fortunate in being able to choose your clients," remarked Dexter suavely.

Mr. Lexham shrugged his shoulders; and Dexter Reece watched him, without appearing to do so; and when, presently, the old lawyer tossed the newspaper aside and took up his letters, Dexter Reece sauntered to the table, and, in an aimless way, picked up the paper. He sauntered back to the window and out to the terrace; a large deerhound was stretched there in the sun, and Dexter Reece began playing with it, at first, cautiously; and presently exclaimed, "You bad dog, you've torn the paper!" he went to the window and held up the fragments. "The dog and I between us have wrecked the Western Morning News! Does it matter?"

Mr. Lexham looked up absently. "Oh, no! there is another copy; it is always taken up to Sir Reginald's room."

"Oh, that's all right!" said Reece, with an air of relief, as he folded up the remains of the paper and placed them on a side table. The page containing the paragraph he had thrust in his pocket.

A mail-phaeton came round, and a moment or two afterwards Evelyn appeared in a light coat and skirt, and a simple but charming hat. Dexter Reece was by no means a susceptible man, and the blood in his veins ran coldly enough; but even he could not be insensible to the beauty and grace of the young girl as she stood before him, pulling on her gauntlet driving-gloves.

"We can't take the groom," she said; "my father wants the carriage. You don't mind trusting yourself with me?"

"Anywhere, and in any circumstances," he replied promptly.

"Miss Evelyn is a splendid whip," remarked Mr. Lexham, with his courtly little bow.

The horses were young and fresh, and Dexter Reece, who was not too richly endowed with physical courage, could not help glancing at Miss Evelyn's slender wrists, and wondering what would happen if the pair of high-fetted cobs were to make a bolt of it; but, though they were dancing about in a particularly high-spirited and restless fashion, Evelyn appeared quite at her ease, and held them firmly enough as they pranced and curvetted over the smooth gravel drive.

"We will go down to Port Dale first. It is such a quaint place; and I am always eager to show it to every one who comes to Thorden. It is quite a strange little world of its own, and, you see"—she pointed with her whip to the cluster of houses beside the estuary which formed the little port—"it is quite apart by itself; there is no place near it; the nearest is a small watering-place, three miles round the bend, which Mr. Lexham is I fear vainly trying to make fashionable and therefore prosperous. It has been the ambition of his life; but my father says it is too far from a railway station, and its immediate surroundings would strike most persons as desolate; but I love these wide stretches of sandy marshland—'burrows' they call them. They make capital golf-links. You play golf, of course, Mr. Reece?"

"No; I'm the only man in England (Continued on Page Nine.)

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